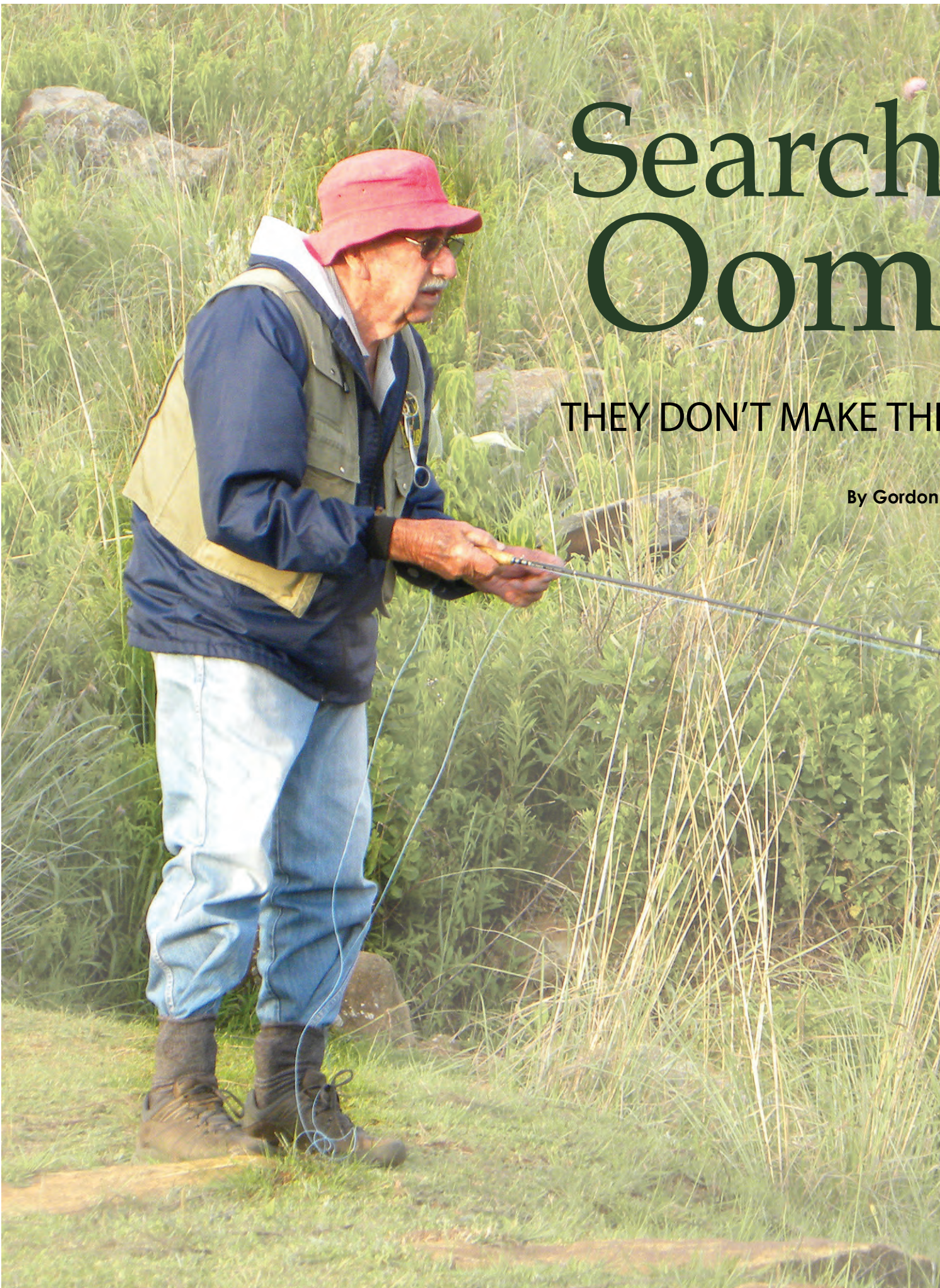


# Search Oom

THEY DON'T MAKE TH

By Gordon





# ing for Sage

EM LIKE THIS ANY MORE

van der Spuy





Self-taught perfection from a master carpenter.



“D O you fish, Sir?” I asked.  
“Me, fish? You’ve gotta be joking,” he replied.  
“You know a helluva lot for someone who doesn’t fish,” I said.

“My dad fishes, builds his own bamboo rods and creels too. Have you ever seen the movie *A River Runs Through It*? Nou ja, that was my childhood.”

“That’s amazing. Who’s your dad? Maybe I’ve read about him in one of my mags,” I queried.

“You won’t know him. Hy vlieg maar onder die radar; he lives in Klerksdorp.”

“Klerksdorp? What is a cane rod builder doing in Klerksdorp?” I asked, astonished.

The bell rang and that was the last time I spoke fishing to my music teacher Lodewyk.

That was in 1996 and I was in Standard 8 at the time. What amazed me was that this old oom was sitting in Klerksdorp building cane rods. This intrigued me endlessly, to the point where I would tell people about this mystical oom from Klerksdorp.

I never forgot about it, and I even told my pal Stephen Boshoff about it 20 years later!

“You need to write a story about this,” Boshoff declared.

“I wouldn’t know where to start,” I protested.

“The oom is probably long gone.”

“Don’t you still know his son?” he pressed.

“I heard he passed away a few years ago; a pity, the guy was a decent human being.”

A month later my pal Stephen phones me. “Gordie, there’s a Potgieter rod on Trout talk, pick up the story from there.”

I search for the post and eventually find it — a gentleman named Amaran Naidoo wants to refurbish an old cane rod that was handed down to him.

I read through the post and eventually reply, telling Amaran not to touch the rod. I explain why. Mark Yelland subsequently replies too, telling me the son’s name was Gerhard.

I’m confused. I phone Mark and tell him about Lodewyk. Mark is sure the son’s name is Gerhard.

“Wait, I’ll phone him,” Mark says.

Later that day Yelland phones back. “Gord, you won’t believe it, Lodewyk was Gerhard’s brother and, get this, you already know him! You’ve been chatting to him on Facebook for years and he ordered a DVD from you the other day!”

“That Gerhard?” I reply as if someone had just zapped me with a cattle prodder.

Mark gives me Gerhard’s number and I immediately phone him; it turns out Oom





Potgieter is still alive. He's 92 and lives in a retirement village in Klerksdorp.

"Ek gaan my pa op Saterdag sien," Gerhard tells me.

"Gerhard, ek sal graag met die oom wil kom gesels," I say.

"Geen probleem, nie, my pa sal dit geniet!"

Two days later I find myself driving to Klerksdorp to meet Oom Sage Potgieter.

I spent the entire day with Oom Sage, his son Gerhard and daughter-in-law Marietjie ...

## MEET THE LEGEND

Oom Sage was christened Salmon Gerhardus Potgieter but was given the nickname Salie by his family. "Salie" is the Afrikaans word for the herb sage, so to many around him, Salmon Potgieter became "Sage".

Oom Sage grew up on a farm in the Verening district, but often took a train ride to visit his brother, at the time a farm manager in Machadodorp, close to the Elands, Toute, and Leeuspruit. That is where he started flyfishing. He did a five-year apprenticeship as a carpenter at Cornelia Colliery but retired as a site supervisor. As Oom Sage says, "Hulle het gesien ek was te lui om te werk toe promote hulle my!"

On the farm they fished with sections of wattle or riverside bamboo. Everything changed

when Oom Sage saw a fly-rod for the first time: "Dit was die mooiste ding in die wêreld vir my, die stok met die baie whippings; ek was heeltemal ge-tickle. Die stok het my heel deurmekaar gemaak; toe ek die stok so kyk was ek bang vir hom, bang om aan hom te vat, want dis 'n holy ding. Maar, ek het 'n craving gekry om so 'n stok te maak."

Later Oom Sage found the swollen butt section of a bamboo rod in the Vaal River, and started figuring out how it was made, comprising six planed sections. As an accomplished carpenter, he had access to hand tools and knew how to work with natural materials. Through trial and error, over many years, he started making the forms and tools required and taught himself to make bamboo rods. He had no mentor and did not communicate with other rod makers; in those days information was scarce.

He admired those old rods he first saw, mostly Hardys, which were long and heavy, and had beautiful brass fittings and porcelain guides. However, in his own work, he adjusted what he saw. "Die eerste ou splitcanes was maar swaar en lomp. Dis maar soos 'n kar; vandag se karre is net beter. Jy het jou dood gedra aan daai stokke met die porcelain ringe," he said.

Oom Sage made his first rod in 1985, as a gift





to his son Gerhard. The bamboo came from the Eastern Transvaal and it has two tips of slightly different actions.

Happy that he could make this "holy thing", and spurred on by Gerhard, Oom Sage developed his craft further. Gerhard assisted in sourcing Tonkin for his father from the United States. Oom Sage also refined his own brass ferrules, using different diameters of brass hobby tubing, and developed a unique node-staggering pattern, guaranteed to provide maximum structural integrity. His guides, with the exception of the stripping guides, were also homemade from stainless steel wire.

Asking Oom Sage what tapers he used, he replied: "Man I don't know, there's something that guides you; I don't know myself. You get this feeling of this must be like that and this has got to be like this and you start working on it. If it works, it works, if it doesn't work you try some other way."

Through word of mouth, Oom Sage's prowess as a rod maker spread. When I asked how many rods he made, he replied: "Laat ek gou gou bietjie dink ... In Amerika is daar definitief drie ... in Duitsland is een. Wat is daai

plek wat so ontwikkel? Dubai? Ja, in Dubai is daar drie; daar is een by Francois, Faanz Becker het een, Joe Vaid het een, hier is vier ... All in all, as ek moet raai, so dertig."

During the 1980s and 1990s Potgieter rods sold for R400-R600. The last rod made, some five years ago, sold for R3 500.

### ON THE WATER

Our discussion turned to fishing, and Oom Sage's information blew me away. His main water was a small stream outside of Klerksdorp called the Schoonspruit; trout water was far

away. While I thought that flyfishing for yellowfish started in earnest in the 1980s, Oom Sage informed me that a Hans Blom, Nols Reyneke (the barber in Klerksdorp) and Nols's brother-in-law Flip Eberson targeted yellowfish on the fly in the Schoonspruit with great success in the 1950s and 1960s. Thinking back, Oom Sage seemed to recall that he first saw them flyfishing for yellows in 1953, the year he got married. After his retirement Oom Sage fished the Vaal regularly, especially the Bothaville and Orkney waters.







Oom Sage's favourite fly was the Turkstra, named after his favourite bakery at the time in Potchefstroom; the Turkstra was a very effective stillwater trout pattern for Oom Sage. He grew up with the Blue Zulu, March Browns, Connemaras and Invictas. Later they used Oom Sage's own Joey and HB Raka as well as his Tambuki Ranger, but the Turkstra, he regarded as being in a class of its own. Fishing was wet, down and across.

Returning the discussion to rods, and observing his neat work, I prompted Oom Sage to talk about finishes. He replied: "Die moeilikheid is, die ouens word te haastig want hy soek daai geld; hy maak die ding vir geld. 'n Split cane stok moet jy met jou hart maak, met liefde; jy maak hom vir jouself. Hy's soos jou vrou, jy gee om..."

What he enjoyed most was casting a new rod for the first time: "Die lekkerste vir my as ek 'n stok gemaak het, is om hom te gaan toets, hom uit te try. Ek sal nooit vergeet nie, die tannie en ek, ek sê vir haar: 'Mamma, kom saam met my dan ry ons gou Schoonspruit toe en try die stokkie.' Ons kom daar, klim oor die draad en so entjie verder is daar 'n poel. By sy inloop is daar so 'n bietjie watergrass, en daar sien ek 'n geelvis se stert uitsteek soos hy wei en rol. Ek sê: 'Mamma, daars hy, daars hy ... nou moet ons hom kry.' Ek gooi. My derde gooi, toe vat hy. Nou moet jy weet, jy het nou net die stok gemaak, jy gooi sy eerste vlieg, en met jou

eerste poging vang jy daai mooi geelvis! Dis 'n holy ding."

I spent the rest of the day chewing the fat with Oom Sage, talking fishing, life and philosophy. We have a drink and I tie a few flies, and he is intrigued with my version of Ed's Balbyter. "Die een sal verseker werk!" he says staring intently at the fly. "Jy weet net, hy gee my daai gevoel." His eyes look like they want to close, but he forces himself awake. "Wil Pa bietjie gaan lê?" Gerhard asks. "Nee," he replies, "ek wil sien wat die man maak..."

Oom Sage is special; they don't make them like this anymore. I paged through a book of short stories that the oom wrote; he loves literature. At some stage Oom Sage suggests to Gerhard that we should go and have a look at the Schoonspruit, see if we can get a yellow to eat. Gerhard gives me a knowing glance; walking is difficult for Oom Sage nowadays.

I go to cast one of Oom Sage's rods instead; it is made from local bamboo and the action is sweet — not too soft and extremely smooth. The rod was made in 1995; I am amazed. And that's how I left there — amazed.

Moments like those are what life should be about. We move too fast, and it's only when you slow down that you really start appreciating things. Baie dankie, Oom, Gerhard en Marietjie, ek het ons kuier baie geniet. Oom Sage, ek het baie van oom geleer, dankie! 🐟